DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 360 630 CS 213 950

AUTHOR DeCiccio, Albert C.
TITLE The Postmodern Writing Center: Some Lessons from Lyotard.
PUB DATE Mar 93
NOTE 20p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (44th, San Diego, CA, March 31-April 3, 1993).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Discourse Analysis; Higher Education; Teacher Role; *Writing Instruction; *Writing Laboratories; Writing Teachers
IDENTIFIERS Composition Theory; Discourse Communities; *Lyotard (Jean Francois); *Postmodernism

ABSTRACT

Reflecting on Jean-Francois Lyotard's work "The Postmodern Condition" may provide those who work in the writing center with additional ideas about how to make writing centers the next best thing in composition instruction. Lyotard offers a way to argue against the affirmation of traditional values and characteristics in writing (i.e., Standard Written English), to argue for differences in writing, and to celebrate all the writing that happens despite the academy's rigid restraints. According to Lyotard, postmodern knowledge is not simply a tool of the authorities: "it refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable." He also has a good deal to say about the value of practice (performativity) and contends that practice is the primary mode of legitimizing knowledge. Lyotard further defines the postmodern condition as one in which people have lost their nostalgia for the lost narrative; rather than reproducing traditional ways of teaching, writing center instructors must remove themselves from a nostalgic reliance on what no longer works and perform the postmodern. While a variety of prominent critics would agree that it might be a problem to think about the postmodern condition as Lyotard does, his theories free both teachers and students from prescribing rules for the elimination of comma splices, fragments, and lapses in agreement and promote the recognition that the writing group itself can decide what rules of usage and grammar make sense for developing texts. (SAM)

The Postmodern Writing Center: Some Lessons from Lyotard

Albert C. DeCiccio

Merrimack College

1993

> No doctor before the end of the eighteenth century had ever thought of listening to the content--how it was said and why--of these words; and yet it was these which signalled [sic] the difference between reason and madness (217). Michel Foucault, "The Discourse on Language" [1]

Glamour or grammar

Frederic Jameson, in "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," writes about the "symbolic act" of Van Gogh's work "Peasant Shoes" that therein is represented "the whole object world of agricultural misery, of stark rural poverty, and the whole rudimentary human world of backbreaking peasant toil, a world reduced to its most brutal and menaced, primitive and marginalized state" (58). About Warhol's "Diamond Dust Shoes," Jameson writes, "Nothing in this painting organizes even a minimal place for the viewer, [for] we have a random collection of dead objects, hanging together on the canvas like so many turnips, as shorn of their earlier life-world as a pile of shoes left over from Auschwitz, or the remainders and tokens of some incomprehensible and tragic fire in the packed dance hall" (60). Wonderfully constructed as they are, I find these passages from Jameson telling when I try to understand the debates in English studies--particularly when they relate to the writing center--over the merits of postmodern theory and practice. While Mr. Jameson would probably find a good deal to commend with the programs we have fashioned in the postmodern writing center, I am concerned with his insistence that there must be a

meaning revealed in a text and, what's more, that he must be able to see it and to affirm it. I say that this concerns me because the tendency reminds me of Foucault's revelation about the mad--those whose speech was excluded from the "common discourse of men" (217). Being reminded of Foucault helps me to understand how some of my colleagues--in the English department and throughout the college--can refer to those whose "texts" do not conform to Standard Written English, or that are not "academic" enough, as "'the truly illiterate among us'" (qtd. in Rose 2). Ironically, by upholding an essentialist platform, Jameson and his like give credibility to the conservative and the condescending. If Jameson is right, what room is there for those who write visionless narratives, for Harraway's cyborg writers? [2] If Jameson is right, then the writing center remains always a "fix-it" shop, a place that patches the cracks in the traditional paradigm.

What is postmodern in the writing center?

I do not believe that Jameson is right--totally. What I propose is that there is something in so-called postmodern theories of language and literature that has a bearing, generally, on what we in English Studies are facing and, in particular, on what we in the writing center are facing.

The movements recently in writing centers toward a more social or collaborative mode of operating have served to "problematize," to use Jameson's word, traditional theories and practices of language and literature. In fact, postmodern views of language as anti-foundational or anti-representational--that is, denying the mirror/lamp

theory of knowledge that supposedly illustrates "T"ruth with a capital T, or that reflects "M"eaning with a capital M--have been established and defended by such writing center scholars as Kenneth Bruffee and Andrea Lunsford. For instance, in the preface to the newest edition of *A Short Course in Writing,* Bruffee writes about how he sees the ideas of Derrida and Rorty as aligned to his own ideas about collaborative learning:

> The work of Rorty and Derrida is complementary; they do the same sort of thing in different philosophical systems. Derrida calls into question the foundations of phenomenology, variously called *presence* or *being.* Rorty calls into question the foundations of epistemology, particularly cognition and other supposed mental processes and entities. In the past decade I have found that this nonfoundational thought provides language for talking coherently about collaborative learning, just as I had found earlier that the discipline of social group work provides expertise for practicing collaborative learning effectively. xv-xvi

In "Collaboration, Control, and the Idea of a Writing Center," Lunsford describes the problems inherent in being too hasty to totalize; I think she really explains the problems with the metanarratives Lyotard disavows in a way all writing center people can understand. You see, Lyotard's thesis is that the modernist (the traditional) metanarratives (science, the dialectic of the Spirit, even Marxism) are no longer viable. This is what Lunsford was so close to saying last winter: the Storehouse and Garret

models for the writing center were no longer as viable to us in the postmodern world of plurality, difference, multiculturalism. Lunsford writes:

> The idea of a center I want to advocate speaks directly to [a] theory of knowledge . . . based not on positivistic principles (that's The Storehouse again [a center of writing information, hierarchically structured and prescriptive]), not on Platonic or absolutist ideals (that's The Garret [a center of validation for "I-search," naively libertarian]), but on the notion of knowledge as always contextually bound, as always socially constructed. Such a center might well have as its motto Arendt's statement: "For excellence, the presence of others is always required." Such a center would place control, power, and authority not in the tutor or staff, not in the individual student, but in the negotiating group. It would engage students not only in solving problems set by teachers but in identifying problems for themselves; not only in working as a group but in monitoring, evaluating, and building a theory of how groups work; not only in understanding and valuing collaboration but in confronting squarely the issues of control that successful collaboration inevitably raises; not only in reaching consensus but in valuing dissensus and diversity. 4-5

When Bruffee and Lunsford talk about anti-foundational notions of writing and group-licensed ways of generating texts, they challenge the prevailing assumptions of the field, including such notions as Standard Written English, Expository Writing,

thesis, topic sentence, coherence, etc. Bruffee and Lunsford open doors for writers heretofore locked out of the so-called literate community of writers. They do not see the so-called *illiterate among us* in quite the same pejorative way as their traditional counterparts do. They might see the merit in the process Warhol used to produce "Diamond Dust Shoes" that Jameson can only affirm exists hermeneutically in Van Gogh's "Peasant Shoes." (Heck, they might even like Lou Reed. [3]) In other words, heaven help us, they might see value, as we in the writing center have, in the production of a story, ritual, or narrative that traditional compositionists can only affirm as inherent in the academic exposition, argument, or persuasive essay.

I'd like to suggest that, in addition to Derrida and Rorty, some reflection on Lyotard's work *The Postmodern Condition* may provide those of us who work in the writing center with additional ideas that may aid in our ongoing endeavor to make writing centers the best next thing in composition instruction. To be fair, some may find aspects of these ideas disturbing. This is because Lyotard denies, as do Rorty and Derrida, the metanarratives of the traditional or modern world: the militant liberator of humanity (in the tradition of the French Revolution) and the speculative unity of all knowledge (in the Hegelian tradition). The modernists among us, and I really have to count myself among them at times, may see citing Lyotard as a dangerous affirmation of the glamour or spectacle of writing, and they may find that idea irresponsible in the same way that they may find the developments of late capitalism repugnant. Like me, they desire a social politics; yet, they say such a politics cannot be forthcoming in any postmodern theory of knowledge. They fear most Lyotard's insistence that everything becomes local, ad hoc, immanent. I agree that these are problems for all of us

groomed in the tradition of the great modernist narratives. But I cannot help but notice in Lyotard an acute recognition of the failures brought about by such narratives. For me, Lyotard at least offers a way to argue against the affirmation of traditional values and characteristics in writing (i. e., Standard Written English), to argue for differences in writing, and to celebrate all that writing that happens despite the academy's rigid constraints.

We won't be fooled again

In a short piece from a relatively recent *College Composition and Communication,* Valerie Balester pretty much declares war on the *founding fathers* of the "CCCC Statement on Principles and Standards," decrying their images of the writing center as, first, "the site of third-class intellectual endeavor" (167) and, second, "as supplemental to the English department curriculum, useful for training graduate teaching assistants and lightening the burden on faculty by giving their students individual attention. In other words, for service" (167). What Balester did was affirm Jeanette Harris' earlier assertion that "Most writing center people still speak of themselves as underdogs, always struggling" (7). Now, what Lyotard says about such stances is that they reflect a kind of "guerrilla war of the marginals, the foreigners, the nonsuccessors" (cited in Jameson, "Foreword," xix). Nevertheless, Balester's piece suggests to me that we in the writing center are making our "move," to use Lyotard's word. Therefore, I challenge my writing center colleagues to read Lyotard, and then to decide whether or not I'm right in asserting that we might make use of the man's ideas

as we fashion the postmodern writing center.

Lyotard's *Postmodern Condition* and the Writing Center

Early on, Lyotard says, "Postmodern knowledge is not simply a tool of the authorities; it refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable" (xxv). Here, I am reminded of the effort Mina Shaughnessy put into trying to educate us about non-standard writers. She was sensitive to differences; she could tolerate the incommensurable. Shaughnessy tried to show us the value behind what traditionalists had seen as incomprehensible in so-called basic writing. Shaughnessy's work was profoundly influential to those of us who have been involved with the writing center movement. One such Shaughnessy follower is Bruffee, who, almost singlehandedly, raised the status of the writing center to a level far removed from the ad hoc "fix it" place traditionalists wanted the center to remain. In thinking about what Lyotard says here, I am reminded that Bruffee's *Short Course* is really a primer in collaborative learning, a methodology that extends Shaughnessy's idea that writing is part of an ongoing conversation and that invites, as did Shaughnessy, writers of all social levels and intellectual abilities to join in on that conversation. Lyotard's statement also reminds me that current writing center people, constantly working as teacher-researchers in the tradition described by Dixie Goswami and Stephen North, are beginning to illustrate that effective writing is being produced by non-native writers as well as from non-standard perspectives. To traditionalists, such writing is not effective because it is non-traditional and therefore incomprehensible. To the

teacher-researchers involved in the writing center, such writing simply extends the boundary of "academic" discourse.

Second, as the above suggests, Lyotard has a great deal to say about the value of practice (performativity, he calls it) in the postmodern world. He writes:

> In contemporary society and culture--postindustrial society, postmodern culture--the question of the legitimation of knowledge is formulated in different terms. The grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation.
>
> The decline of narrative can be seen as an effect of the blossoming of techniques and technologies since the Second World War, which has shifted emphasis from the ends of action to its means 37

It seems to me that many of us feel as if we need to carry out "guerrilla warfare" with our self-proclaimed, research-oriented counterparts in literature because our work in the writing center is, largely, pedagogical--focused on the process of learning, rather than on mastering a body of knowledge; on the means, rather than the end. It seems, according to Lyotard, that all we can value any longer is local practice. It is, it seems to me, practice that should drive our initiatives in the postmodern writing center. This practice has demonstrated, for the past two decades [4], that learning is eminently more democratic this way.

Third, Lyotard asserts the following about all of us living in a postmodern world:

"Most people have lost the nostalgia for the lost narrative. It in no way follows that they are reduced to barbarity" (41). When we find ourselves constantly embroiled in debate with our traditional colleagues over the value of instruction we offer in the writing center, we are under the gun to take the high road. We reproduce scholarship; we reproduce argumentation about the value of collaboration; we reproduce studies that acknowledge the merit of what we are doing; we remind people of the paradigm shift taking place. And, then, as I am showing in this little essay, we become more understandable to our colleagues. This is because we have readied reasonable discourse for an arena of debate with reasonable people. We resort to a modernist podium, and so always feel a little frustrated--as if we are constantly reinventing the wheel. What we must do now is take the next step, the only one Lyotard believes is left to take: Remove ourselves from a nostalgic reliance upon what no longer works, and perform in the postmodern. This is not to suggest that anything goes; it is to affirm that more and different kinds of work are being produced and we have already agreed to celebrate it all. [5]

Fourth, Lyotard has helped me to understand why we'll face problems when, say, we try to extend the conversation about the plurality of writing, about collaborative learning, about power outside of the writing center. He writes:

> The technocrats declare that they cannot trust what society designates as its needs; they "know" that society cannot know its own needs since they are not variables independent of the new technologies. Such is the arrogance of the decision makers--and their blindness . . . . [that they say]

"Adapt your aspirations to our ends--or else." 63-4

Just as those who affirm the postmodern condition will be criticized for their efforts, we in the writing center will be asked to compromise, at the very least, our positions. We will be asked to forget about being right, to adapt what we do, say, to the English department's program, to provide statistics on the numbers of tutees we see in order to justify our budget proposals for next year, to remain on the margins. We must remember that we know better. In *Lives on the Boundary,* Mike Rose writes:

> We are in the middle of an extraordinary social experiment: the attempt to provide education for all members of a vast pluralistic democracy. To have any prayer of success, we'll need many conceptual blessings: A philosophy of language and literacy that affirms the diverse sources of linguistic competence and deepens our understanding of the ways class and culture blind us to the richness of those sources. A perspective on failure that lays open the logic of error. An orientation toward the interaction of poverty and ability that undercuts simple polarities, that enables us to see simultaneously the constraints poverty places on the play of the mind and the actual mind at play within those constraints. We'll need a pedagogy that encourages us to step back and consider the threat of the standard classroom and that shows us, having stepped back, how to step forward to invite a student across the boundaries of that powerful room. Finally, we'll need a revised store of images of educational

> excellence, ones closer to egalitarian ideals--ones that embody the reward and turmoil of education in a democracy, that celebrates the plural, messy human reality of it. At heart, we'll need a guiding set of principles that do not encourage us to retreat from, but to move closer to, an understanding of the rich mix of speech and ritual and story that is America. 238

Working in the writing center we have become aware of the self-discovering that should take place as a student goes through the academy is sometimes stifled in the traditional paradigm. In that world, we have learned, competition is promoted in a myopic search for the "best" student. We know that this search profits precious few students; in fact, we work with the many who end up branded with that ugly tattoo, *the truly illiterate among us.* We've talked about writing with these stigmatized students, who too often equate their supposed "low rank" with their self-worth and, as a result, isolate themselves, fearing that any attempt at integration may be met with ridicule. And we have come to deplore that attitude which associates non-participation in a learning activity with behavior dysfunction; we know that what it really is is fear of oppression. The writing center--open and supportive--has demonstrated to us that such fears can be met and overcome. That's why I believe the writing center is the place of Rose's experiment. That's what I think all of you reading this piece believe as well. That's why I say we know better than to adapt our aspirations to anyone's else's program but our own.

But it just doesn't seem right

Modernists (traditionalists) are, quite understandably, skeptics of postmodernists. Social and literary critics like Jameson see in Lyotard only an affirmation of the extension of capitalism, or the cultural logic of late capitalism. Feminist critics like Fraser and Nicholson see in Lyotard contradiction and the abandonment of social criticism. They write:

> . . . Lyotard insists that the field of the social is heterogeneous and nontotalizable. As a result, he rules out the sort of critical social theory which employs general categories like gender, race, and class. From his perspective, such categories are too reductive of the complexity of social identities to be useful. . . . Lyotard's postmodern conception of criticism without philosophy rules out several recognizable genres of social criticism. From the premise that criticism cannot be grounded by a foundationalist philosophical metanarrative, he infers the illegitimacy of large historical stories, normative theories of justice, and social-theoretical accounts of macrostructures which institutionalize inequality. . . . Lyotard tries to fashion some new genres of social criticism from the discursive resources that remain. Chief among these is smallish, localized narrative. He seeks to vindicate such narrative against both modern totalizing metanarrative and the scientism that is hostile to all narrative. One genre of postmodern social criticism, then, consists in relatively discrete, local

> stories about the emergence, transformation, and disappearance of various discursive practices treated in isolation from one another. . . . Lyotard evidently assumes that practitioners would narrate such stories when seeking to persuade one another to modify the pragmatics or constitutive norms of their practice. . . . But this drives Lyotard to make normative judgments about the value and character of the threatened practices. These judgments are not strictly immanent in the practices judged. Rather, they are metapractical. Thus, Lyotard's view of postmodern social criticism is neither entirely self-consistent nor entirely persuasive. 24-5

Even Harraway, tied as she is to the technologies Lyotard discusses, has an agenda that would not square entirely with Lyotard's.

Now, I agree that it might be a problem to think about our postmodern condition as Lyotard does. But it's not a problem that particularly bothers me. I think the only thing we give up with Lyotard's way of operating is a lingering desire to affirm what is no longer possible in the postmodern world. I mean, we may no longer have read the fifty star theme; we may begin to recognize as effective writing the visionless story of the young man caught up in the ghetto fashioned by late capitalism, or the reinscribed images of the young woman struggling to write her body. We may no longer have to prescribe rules for the elimination of comma splices, fragments, and lapses in agreement; we may begin to recognize that the writing group itself agrees to decide upon what rules of usage and grammar make sense for their developing texts. We

may be saying that traditional research is an outmoded exercise; we may begin to recognize that the only worthwhile research is that which we generate (and then later narrate) while we are practicing. In the end, we really threaten with postmodern ideas that percolate in our Burkean Parlors, our collaborative writing centers that are socially organized and egalitarian, because

> The idea of a writing center informed by a theory of knowledge as socially constructed, of power and control as constantly negotiated and shared, and as collaboration as its first principle presents quite a challenge . . . . to higher education, an institution that insists on rigidly controlled individual performance, on evaluation as punishment, on isolation. Lunsford 5

Notes

[1] The passage is a fitting epigraph for this essay because it calls to mind Ken Bruffee's demonstration with Shaughnessy's "Reality" essay (see *A Short Course in Writing*). In that demonstration, Bruffee shows that paying attention to the surface features of a text is discriminatory and not really of any value in trying to encourage better writing.

[2] According to Donna Harraway, "A cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (149). And cyborg writing, says Harraway, "must not be about the Fall, the imagination of a once-upon-a-time wholeness before language, before writing, before Man. Cyborg writing is about the power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other" (175). See Chapter 8, "A Cyborg Manifesto," in Harraway's *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women,* New York: Routledge, 1991, 149-81.

[3] In the sixties, Lou Reed and *The Velvet Underground* toured New York's East Village with the *Exploding Plastic Inevitable,* Andy Warhol's mixed media show. A lot of sensory titillation, to be sure; plenty of parody, too--the stuff Mr. Jameson would surely affirm.

4 Muriel Harris' writing lab at Purdue is into its second decade and is considered the first "writing center" that was not merely an ad hoc measure to patch the cracks of a traditional paradigm. For about that long, then, writing centers have become the best next thing in writing instruction. (Harris is, of course, editor of *The Writing Lab Newsletter.*)

5 At Phillips (Andover), a writing workshop modeled on the principles of collaborative learning as well as on the principles espoused by Dixie Goswami and the Bread Loaf School of Writing has provoked inner-city, middle-school students to see expressive, nontraditional writing as a way out of oppression and depression. As a result, one young writer recently proclaimed at a public reading, "I feel a power coming all over me with words!"

Works Cited

Balester, Valerie. "Revising the Statement: On the Work of Writing Centers." *CCC* 44 (1992): 167-71.

Bruffee, Kenneth A. *A Short Course in Writing.* 4th ed. New York: HarperCollins, 1993.

Foucault, Michel. "The Discourse on Language." *The Archaeology of Knowledge.* London, 1972.

Fraser, Nancy and Linda J. Nicholson. "Social Criticism without Philosophy: An Encounter between Feminism and Postmodernism." In *Feminism/ Postmodernism.* Ed. Linda J. Nicholson. New York: Routledge, 1990. 19-38.

Harraway, Donna. "A Cyborg Manifesto." *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women.* New York: Routledge, 1991. 149-81.

Harris, Jeanette. "An Interview with the Founding Editors of the *Writing Center Journal.*" *Writing Center Journal* 11:1 (1990): 8.

Jameson, Frederic. "Foreword." *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge.* Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989.

Jameson, Frederic. "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism." *New Left Review:* 53-92.

Lunsford, Andrea. "Collaboration, Control, and the Idea of a Writing Center." *Writing Lab Newsletter* 16:4-5(1991-1992): 1-6.

Lyotard, Jean-Francois. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge.* Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989.

Rose, Mike. *Lives on the Boundary.* New York, Penguin, 1989.